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Switching Gears and Changing Lanes

Earlene Hammock, Ph.D.

I. Introduction

From musing over Shakespeare's fine lines and metaphors to teaching technical writing and editing, and finally, to cranking out scientific and technical documents, writing articles, and editing publications—how'd a nice girl like me end up in a place like this?

Twice, after having prepared for an academic career of teaching and research, I found myself in a technical communications position—first, at the University of Texas at El Paso College of Engineering and later, at Los Alamos National Laboratory. What happened?

In both instances, after completing my M.A. and again after the Ph. D., my plan for life hit a detour. Several events and circumstances converged, including divorce and death of a parent, and given the paucity and undesirable (to me) locations of available tenure-track academic positions as well as the general low salaries, I was prompted to take a path different from the original plan. In the time between the two degrees, I taught classes at the University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso Community College, the Motorola twin plant in Juarez, Mexico, the University of New Mexico, the Pedagogical University in Krakow, Poland, Santa Fe Community College, and Northern New Mexico Community College. I also did a one-year stint as a high school English teacher in Colorado, which made me far more amenable to professional writing than to teaching.

I have learned that the same principles and processes are at work in both worlds. In a classroom, the instructor must motivate students, design assignments, guide the production process, and evaluate the results. Students generally know less than the instructor and are there to learn 'how-to-do-it.' Technical communicators respond to clients and supervisors, who function similarly to instructors, except that, unlike students, professional technical communicators can—and should—take more proactive roles. They can analyze and design the document or project, take charge of the production process, and participate in the evaluation.

To facilitate professional success, I incorporate the functions of both instructor and student in my own projects, whether I'm working alone or with a team. As an instructor, I act as a facilitator, encouraging students to be proactive with their assignments. In the student role, I ask for directions and feedback. From the two roles, I've distilled a process that works in both the academic and professional worlds. While not original with me, these four steps make up a practical path to excellence in technical communications.

1. Understand the project **purpose** and presentation of material. (why, what, and so what)
2. Define the **audience**. (who)
3. Develop a **process** to follow. (how) What has to happen? In what order?
 - Determine the **resources and materials** needed to complete this project.
 - Create a **work plan and schedule** for the project.
 - Work backward from a **deadline** that fits tasks to time available.
4. **Review and revise** as you go and/or when the document or project is complete.
 - **Detach** and adopt an impersonal, open-minded attitude; open the eyes and ears, and (hardest of all) close the mouth. Practice active listening and look for opportunities for improvement.
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II. Four Steps to Success

1. Understand the Purpose

What is the document or project supposed to do? Determine the **topic and scope**: is it a memo, description, definition, proposal or funding request, project summary or report? Is it five pages or a thousand, written, text only, presentation only, or multimedia? Figure out the **context**: is the document part of a series, an annual report, a project overview or process, a chronological account of some phenomena or event? Is the **audience** a group of peers, a general public audience, or an institutional audience, internal or external?

4. Review and Revise

Review, revision, and evaluation of a finished document or project can be an opportunity for improvement or a crushing blow to one's sensibilities and self-esteem. Here, the finished document or project is evaluated, or graded, by a supervisor, client, or instructor. In feedback, what is said is perhaps not as important as how it's said. Constructive criticism can issue a challenge for improved performance to the technical writer or student, but ego-driven criticism, the destructive kind, can discourage and defeat both student and writer. So, how can the individual professional or student be proactive?

Be sure to **understand** the task or assignment given. **Ask questions**, especially the dumb ones. **Know** exactly what's expected and when it's due. Practice **active listening** and restate what was heard or understood. **Be realistic**; we can't leap tall buildings in a single bound without the magic cape and a healthy serving of kryptonite, nor can we produce high-quality communication products overnight. Never mind the Kinko commercials that show harried people miraculously producing a perfect document or presentation after an all-night work session.

Be proactive and initiate the review process. Give the client/supervisor/instructor a sample or a preview of the finished product and **ask for feedback**. Be **willing** and **enthusiastic** to hear the feedback. Listen, don't defend. Try to please the client and make suggested—or demanded—revisions in as good humor as possible. **Don't take it personally**. Stay **focused** on the purpose and audience for the **document**. Keep conversations about the document relevant to the document, not aimed at personal preferences or personalities.

III. Conclusion

So where do Shakespeare and his fine musings fit into this workaday world? Actually, Shakespeare infuses my work environment and my daily projects, even the mundane chores. My work day begins with Shakespeare. My office is bedecked with posters of Shakespeare's plays, constant reminders of characters fair and foul, of language sublime, of curses blasphemous and withering, of praise transcendent. A fat volume, *The Norton Shakespeare*, sits on the worktable behind my computer screen, as do a calendar with a daily quotation from his plays and a snippet of some historical note, and a 6 by 8 reproduction of the bust engraving from the Stratford-upon-Avon. And why? Wherefore?

As reminders, gentle reminders, of the strengths and weaknesses, the plots, the schemes, the ambitions, the passions, the cold sharpness and the warm compassion of the common humanity we share in the sometimes harried world of technical communications. Shakespeare keeps my day in perspective, my perfectionism and obsessive-compulsive behavior at bay. In a world of work, money, speed, technology, and productivity, Shakespeare keeps me human.

Shakespeare, too, had to write for a living and keep his clients happy. He worked with a team of prima donna playwrights and pesky, bottom-line theater owners. He often had to stifle his muse and follow a trendy theatrical style to keep the paying crowds in the Globe—*Hamlet* was the best of the faddish 'revenge tragedies,' *Romeo and Juliet* an adaptation of a popular love story, and *Macbeth* a study in political correctness. He was subject to official censorship (a renaissance forerunner to review and comment?). When the plague closed London theaters, he took the show on the road and found other kinds of writing to support the wife and kids back in Stratford.

Shakespear balances my two worlds and grounds me in the realities of earning one's keep by the pen. So far, none of my clients has wielded the life-and-death power of a Queen Elizabeth or a King James. And while I know "How full of briers is this workaday world," I also remember,

"If all the year were playing holidays,
To sport would be as tedious as to work."

Shakespeare, *King Henry IV, Part One*

What **difference** does the document make; how is the reader/audience different after reading, viewing the document? So what?

2. Define Audience, Audience, Audience

Make the abstract idea concrete and practical. **Who** is going to read or use this document? Instead of vague categories such as “general audience” or “physicists,” be very specific. Consider age, education, level of interest and expertise in the topic, and importance of topic to reader. Write out a profile of audience demographics.

3. Develop a Process

Often, assignments from the book are somewhat removed from the realities of everyday technical writing and editing, or **abstract** instead of **concrete and practical**. To improve the students’ experience, I sometimes take actual professional documents into the classroom for students to analyze, rewrite, and use as models for their assignments. Students look for ‘clues’ and guides to understanding the text, for example, simple transitions help the reader understand the sequence of steps, events, and information flow. For example, a technical definition—of a term, jargon, or a technical, medical, scientific phrase—assignment can be difficult for a student, just as a vague project assignment can baffle an inexperienced (or even experienced) tech writer. But, when students get their hands on a document with a technical definition included in the text or when new tech writers have a copy of the previous report, they see the definition or document’s significance within a context that provides relevance. Who is going to read this definition, what does the reader know about the topic, how can I make *this information* meaningful and clear *to this reader*?

Teams

Almost all technical communication projects comprise the work of more than one person, so **working with others** is an essential interpersonal skill for technical communicators. Many times, a technical communicator has to compromise and adjust to the needs of coworkers. In the classroom, I assign team projects and give both a team grade and individual evaluations, so that each member is **accountable** for a part of the project. Student teams set priorities, develop a work plan, assign tasks, and set deadlines. Each student evaluates the project as a whole and evaluates individual contributions. This type of project, I find, mirrors the work environment—leaders emerge, control freaks squirm, sluggards dawdle, prima donnas whirl—and professional writers as well as students realize the importance of cooperation and mutual support to the success of a project. Team members are responsible for solving problems among members and keeping the project on task and schedule.

Materials and resources

What does the project require—information? Where is it available—a databank, a person, another document, a library? Or does the project require special equipment and materials—workrooms, cameras, software, printers, outside resources? No matter how large or small, it’s a good idea to inventory and assemble all the necessary components whether they be paperclips or people.

Work plan and schedule

For my own documents and projects, I develop a work plan and schedule of all tasks necessary for completion. This obsessive/compulsive behavior may come from developing and making assignments with due dates, fending off dog-eats-homework scenarios, and presenting consequences for noncompliance. I act as my own schoolmarm and encourage students to do the same.

Deadlines: hard and fast

Just like in the real world of technical communications, project **deadlines** are hard and fast in a college class. No more, ‘my car broke down,’ or ‘my printer cartridge ran out.’ The bottom line at work is production of a complete document by a certain time, at a certain cost. Late work has real-life consequences, e.g., the annual performance appraisal; in class, late work means points off the grade.